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William G. Robbins, Mark Spence,
and Sara Dant Ewert

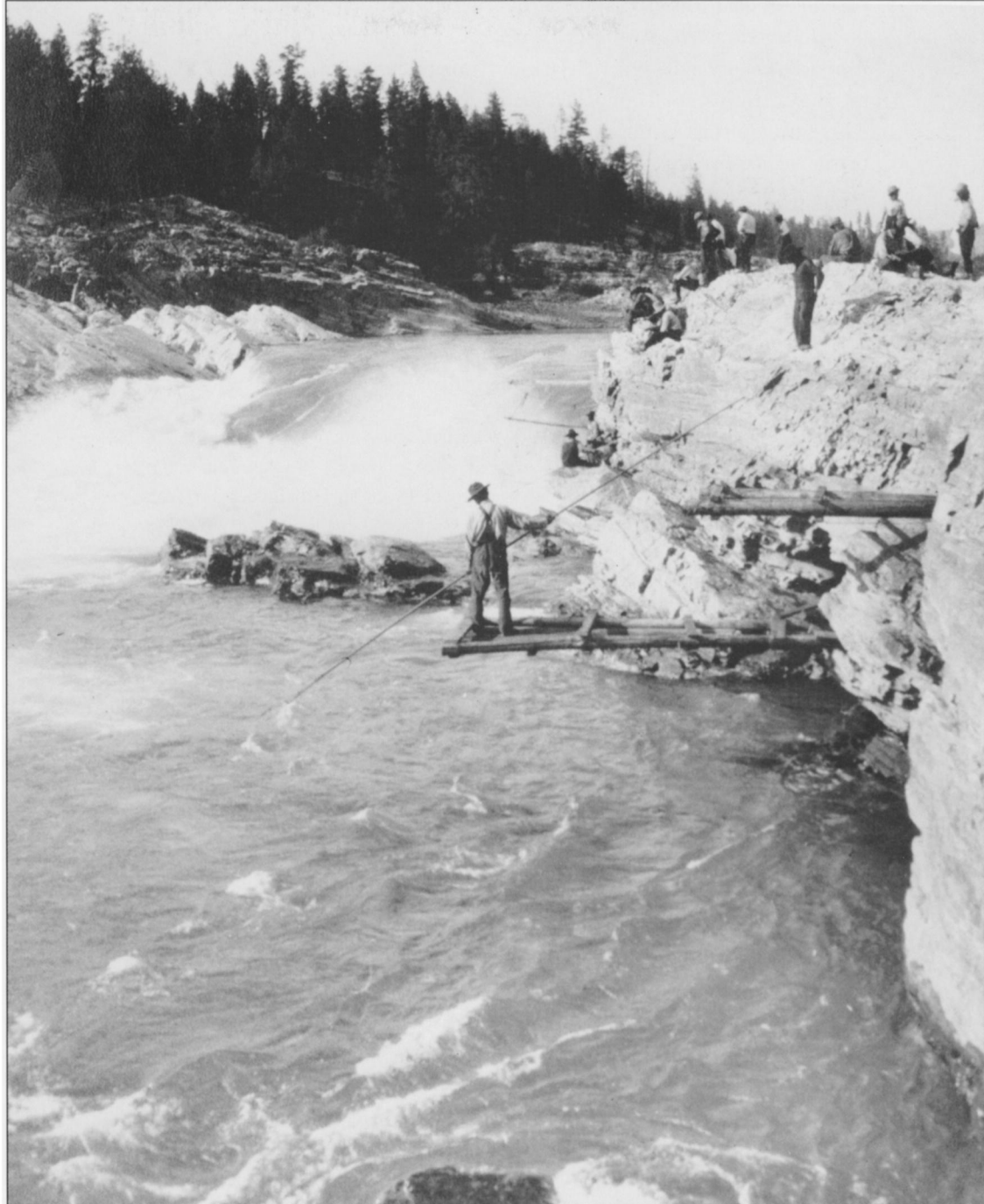
Beyond Place: A Forum

Bioregionalism and the History of Place

by William L. Lang

HISTORIANS ARE AS SUSCEPTIBLE to trends as any group of scholars, even if their reputations for being cautious are generally well deserved. Recently, the idea of place has been a topic of great interest among literary critics, cultural anthropologists, political scientists, and, of course, geographers. References to the “sense of place” are ubiquitous. The phrase, as one scholar recently put it, “has degenerated into a cliché.” Among historians, place has long presented a problem of scale and, more importantly, a problem of agency. Just what role has place played in the changes historians document and seek to understand? Is the idea of place elastic enough to suggest nearly any spatial dimension? Does place make more or less sense if it is applied to a neighborhood or a continent? Can place be understood as a mental construct — say, a community of agriculturalists who live in many disparate regions but share in the raising of livestock on the range — or perhaps the creation of a region based on identities, such as the Hutterite colonies in the U.S. and Canadian wests?¹

These questions are not rhetorical. What historians use to bound their probing into the past puts limits on their results, on their conclusions, on their meaning. What they mean by place has consequences. Because historians have long emphasized political, economic, and legal subjects, discussions about place have usually corresponded to political boundaries and economic patterns of change. Region, therefore, nearly always has referred to a portion of a larger polity or to a specialized area of economic activity. Nineteenth-century European historians, Eugen Weber recently argued, altered the idea of region by revising “foundation myths” to legitimize the new nations that emerged in a post-Napoleonic world. Thomas Macaulay’s recasting of English history in the 1840s, for example, created a national past that



Prime fishing locations on Pacific Northwest rivers, like Kettle Falls on the upper Columbia River, were important economic and cultural places for Native groups. These places were part of a vibrant regional trade network that had connected people in the region for millennia.

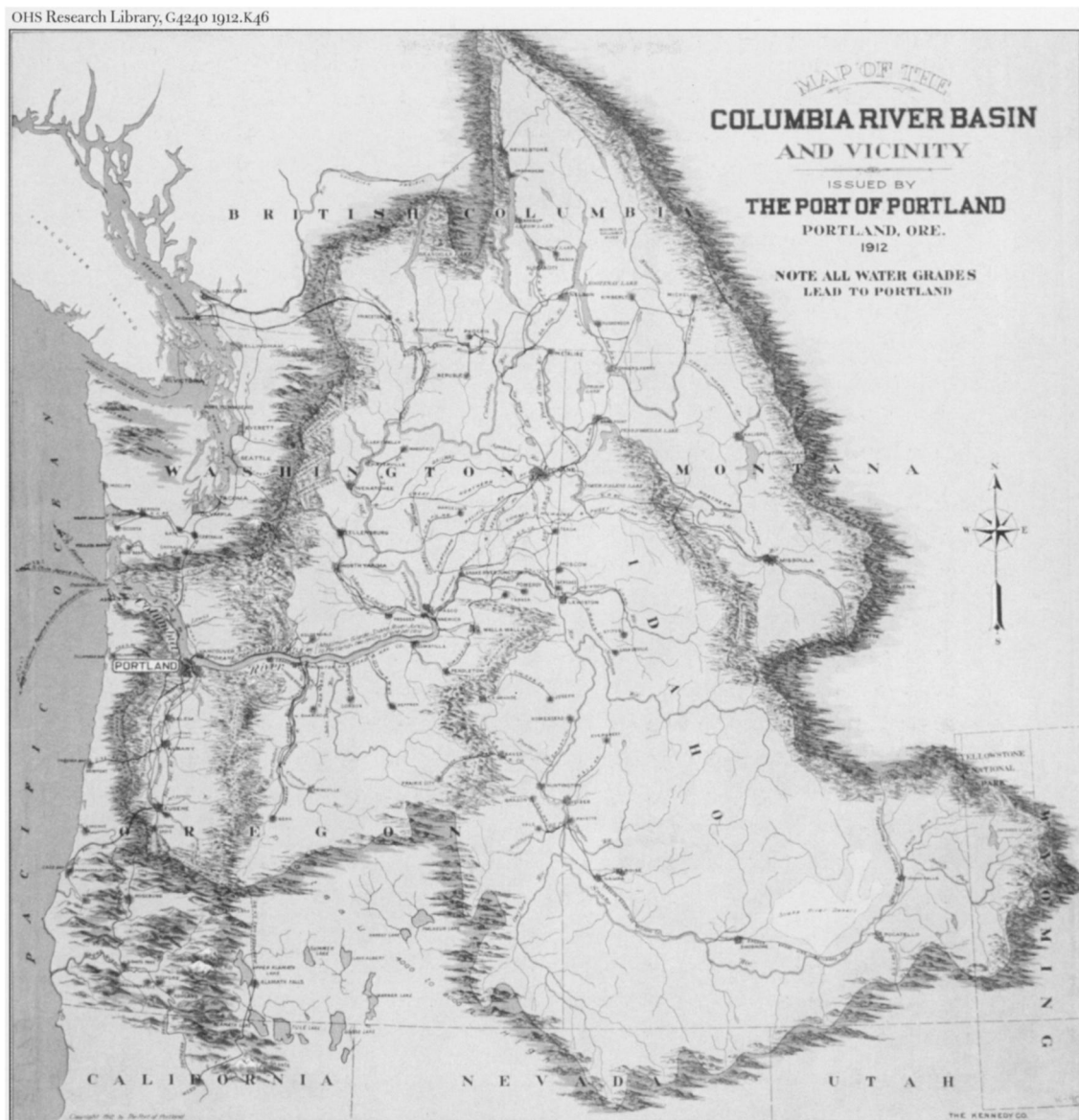
obscured or denied local customs that did not affirm a liberal explanation of England's political development. Writing in the 1830s, George Bancroft did much the same for American history, and Frederick Jackson Turner's emphasis on the process of making an American nation out of conquering western territories had a similar effect. These triumphalist histories emphasized national symbols and storylines to the detriment of regional and local identities. During the twentieth century, political and economic modernization explanations of historical change further emphasized the diminution of region in service to the nation-state by assuming that regions would disappear, that modern political development meant centralization, and that modern culture expressed itself dominantly in national terminologies and imagery. In the early twenty-first century, the ideology of globalization appears to demand the destruction of region and locality. Between nations and within nations, as poet Wendell Berry recently wrote about American political leadership,

the people of wealth and power do not know what it means to take a place seriously: to think it worthy, for its own sake, of love and study and careful work. They cannot take a place seriously because they must be ready at any moment, by the terms of power and wealth in the modern world, to destroy any place.

During the last century or so, there have been few who have spoken up for regions as passionately and pointedly as Wendell Berry. Nonetheless, regionalism triggered strong, even politically pugnacious, exponents during the Depression years, but World War II and the Cold War drowned it out. The idea of regionalism drifted into local back-eddies until the mid-1970s, when America's post-war culture came under increasing criticism.²

The idea of bioregionalism appeared during the 1970s as part of an expanded public discussion about environmental conditions, especially where public health seemed at risk. Bioregionalism owed its modern conception as much to ecology as to regional studies, and it drew on a long-established biogeographical approach to natural history that reached back to Gilbert White and Alexander von Humboldt. The first iteration came from California ecologists Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann, who defined bioregion in 1978 as referring "both to a geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness — to a place and the ideas that have developed about how to live in that place." Jim Dodge expanded the idea in *CoEvolution Quarterly* in 1981, arguing that "a central element of bioregionalism — and one that distinguishes it from similar politics of place — is the importance given to natural systems, both as the source of physical nutrition and as the body of metaphors from which our spirits draw sustenance." In 1985, Kirkpatrick Sale reduced these ideas to a pithy description: bioregionalism looks at places as if they should be "governed by nature, not legislature."³

Historians have been slow to embrace the idea of bioregionalism, partly because it begs two questions: how should we define bioregions, and how can the idea



There are many ways to understand a watershed as unifying a bioregion. The Port of Portland's 1912 vision of the Columbia River Basin characterized the river as an economic conduit that would bring the natural resource wealth of the basin to the city's front door.

help explain the past? The materialist position, as William Robbins makes plain in his essay — “Bioregional and Cultural Meaning” — “must give central consideration to material, physical, even objective realities.” This view emphasizes bioregion as bounded by terrain and the physical content of nature. The region is characterized by what people acquire from nature and how they do it. The idealist position marks off bioregions in a different way. As geographer Yi-fu Tuan has explained,

landscape is “a construct of the mind and of feeling . . . an ordering of reality from different angles.” Put a little differently, people define where they are by where they think they are. The result for understanding bioregion is, as Wendell Berry put it, “If you don’t know *where* you are you don’t know *who* you are.”⁴

There is a broad intellectual middle ground that stretches between materialist and idealist interpretations of place, region, and bioregion. More than two decades ago, Donald Meinig outlined ten different ways of understanding landscape, ranging from natural, which diminished human participation, to aesthetic, which underscored human emotional responses. “Any landscape,” Meinig emphasized, “is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads.” If we see the Columbia River Basin as a bioregion, for example, we might focus on the operation of a managed river system as much as the physical dimensions of an enormous watershed. What we expect from or find important in a landscape, in other words, fully informs how we see the place. When seen in the light of historical change, the idea of bioregion includes layers of complexity that mix environment and human perception. Michael Conzen reminds us that “to view the landscape historically is to acknowledge its cumulative character; to acknowledge that nature, symbolism, and design are not static elements of the human record but change with historical experience.”⁵

If Conzen is correct, bioregionalism should be understood as a dynamic conception, a description of place that can describe and help explain a range of historical relationships between humans and nature. Mark Spence, in “Bioregions and Nation-States,” explores the dynamic definitions of region through a not-so-likely example: the Lewis and Clark expedition. The retelling of the historic trek in subsequent commemorations, Spence argues, “presents Lewis and Clark as the heroes of a national origin story in which American history begins when Americans encounter Nature.” The stories focus on “aesthetic and economic valuations of the environment,” not on ecology or natural history. It is a saga of triumph over nature and the accomplishments of economic development. If we select any era in the history of development in Lewis and Clark’s Pacific Northwest, we are likely to see Conzen’s principle at work. What we see are representations of what people expected from nature, how they built their lives from those assumptions, and what they did to accommodate themselves to locality. Katherine Morrissey makes this point in her explanation of how settlers and entrepreneurs created the idea of an Inland Empire that centered on Spokane. The content and dimensions of that region, Morrissey explains, changed over time according to the ways people understood their relationship to place and environment. “Environmental perceptions,” she writes, “are the responses of an individual to the external world that result when a person sees, hears, smells, tastes, and feels a specific environment within the context of his or her expectations, knowledge, and experiences. They serve as a basis for regional identity.”⁶

A bioregionalism that can replace other politics of place will likely incorporate Conzen's and Morrissey's dynamic definitions of historic change in specific landscapes. Politics is about many things, but it is surely about squaring the desirable in the face of the possible. It works best when the problems are clearly defined and the methods are efficient and well understood. In environmental politics, as Sara Ewert explains in "Bioregional Politics," relatively grand visions may be achievable through bioregional solutions that focus on land use. In the American West, land and water use dominate environmental politics, and it is not too much to say that the environmental political history of the greater region is tied to their control. Ewert argues that a bioregional approach can recast how we have understood our relationship to the environment and can suggest new perceptions of where we are and what we are about.

If bioregionalism is all of these things and possibilities, then it may be too inexact or unwieldy to help us understand our history. No single orientation or interpretation of the past can hope to answer all of our questions, but these essays suggest that bioregionalism has merit, especially if it is understood as a dynamic conception that can be dexterous in revealing human-environmental relationships. They describe an idea that goes beyond the generalized study of place, because the orientation is specifically on the links between physical nature and what humans understand it to mean. Becoming more knowledgeable and smart about this subject could have a direct bearing on how we live in our bioregion today.

Bioregional and Cultural Meaning: The Problem with the Pacific Northwest

by William G. Robbins

IDEAS ABOUT BIOREGIONALISM and bioregional history are, by definition, rooted in physical and material worlds. Bioregions themselves rest at the borders between geography and history. In the past two decades, environmental visionaries, especially those promoting a back-to-nature agenda, have crafted some of the most provocative writing on bioregionalism.⁷ To speak of bioregionalism, therefore, is to address much more than an intellectual construction tailored to meet current literary fashions. Because biological and spatial meaning is implied in the use of the term, we must give central consideration to material, physical, and objective realities. I begin, therefore, with a strong endorsement of the materialist conception of history, a perspective centered in the dynamics of social and physical change. Such an approach provides the best means to understand the persistent and increasing ability of humans to direct and control the forces of nature, their seemingly ever-expanding technologies, and the continual reorganization of production processes.

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